"It’s Not My Fault; It’s Not Serious": Athlete Accounts of Moral Disengagement in Competitive Sport

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This study was designed to assess athletes’ use of moral disengagement in competitive sport. We conducted semistructured interviews with 24 elite male and female athletes in basketball and taekwondo. Participants described transgressive behaviors in competitive situations and reasons for adopting such behaviors. Content analyses revealed that the eight moral disengagement mechanisms identified in everyday life (i.e., moral justification, advantageous comparison, euphemistic labeling, minimizing or ignoring consequences, attribution of blame, dehumanization, displacement of responsibility, and diffusion of responsibility; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996) were germane in sport. However, the most frequently adopted mechanisms in sport (i.e., displacement and diffusion of responsibility, attribution of blame, minimizing or ignoring consequences, and euphemistic labeling) differed somewhat from those considered most salient in everyday life (i.e., moral justification, advantageous comparison, and euphemistic labeling). Moral disengagement mechanisms linked to projecting fault onto others ("It’s not my fault") and minimization of transgressions and their consequences ("It’s not serious") appear to be especially prominent in sport. The findings extend the sport moral disengagement literature by showcasing athlete accounts of moral disengagement.

The sport psychology literature documents that sport and physical activity contexts are favorable to the emergence of transgressive behaviors and, therefore, to the study of moral functioning (see Shields & Bredemeier, 2007; Weiss, Smith, & Stuntz, 2008). A host of factors have been explored relative to the conduct of transgressive behaviors, with recent sport-related efforts targeting moral disengagement (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007; Lucidi, Grano, Leone, Lombardo, & Pesce, 2004; Lucidi et al., 2008). Moral disengagement is a self-regulatory pro-
cess involving the cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct, negative effects of actions, targets of transgressive acts, and one’s role in causing harm (Bandura, 1991, 1999). This process serves to override one’s regulatory self-sanctions, thus enabling one to disengage from usual moral standards. Several mechanisms of moral disengagement are conceptualized and illustrated within the theoretical framework of Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996). For Bandura and colleagues (1996), moral disengagement in everyday life is characterized by eight mechanisms: (a) moral justification, (b) advantageous comparison, (c) euphemistic labeling, (d) minimizing or ignoring the consequences, (e) attribution of blame, (f) dehumanization, (g) displacement of responsibility, and (h) diffusion of responsibility.

Moral justification is making detrimental conduct personally and socially acceptable by portraying such conduct as in the service of valued social and moral purposes (e.g., it is alright to fight to protect one’s friends; Bandura et al., 1996). Advantageous comparison exploits the contrast principle by comparing a reprehensible behavior to one that is far worse. For example, it is okay to verbally insult a person because physically assaulting that person is more severe (Bandura et al., 1996). Euphemistic labeling consists of camouflaging pernicious activities as innocent or using sanitizing language (Bandura, 1999). For example, to hit someone who is obnoxious may be referred to by the perpetrator as giving that person “a lesson” (Bandura et al., 1996). The mechanism of minimizing or ignoring consequences is operative when individuals adopt harmful conduct toward others to attain personal goals or obtain rewards. Individuals avoid facing consequences by minimizing or even ignoring them (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1996). For example, one might conclude that transgressing rules is not serious if nobody is hurt.

Attribution of blame is illustrated in situations in which people view themselves as faultless victims driven to conducting injurious acts by others or circumstances. Harmful conduct becomes a justifiable defensive reaction to provocation (Bandura et al., 1996). Dehumanization is perceiving someone as not to deserve being treated like a human or attributing animalistic qualities to someone (Bandura et al., 1996). Displaced responsibility pertains to viewing actions as stemming from the pressures or dictates of authorities; one does not feel personally responsible for actions (Bandura, 1999). Diffused responsibility pertains to attributing detrimental behavior to several individuals acting together. Responsibility can be diffused through division of labor, group decision making, or group action (Bandura, 1991). For example, one may perceive that it is unfair to blame an individual who had only a small part in the harm caused by a group.

Moral disengagement mechanisms have been explored relative to a host of social issues and settings, including: transgressive acts in society (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001), prisons (South & Wood, 2006), transgressing civic duties (Caprara & Capanna, 2005), bullying in schools (Menesini et al., 2003), implementation of the death penalty (Osofsky, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2005), and military conduct (Aquino, Reed II, Thau, & Freeman, 2007; McAlister, Bandura, & Owen, 2006). However, only a few recent studies have investigated moral disengagement in the sport setting. Lucidi and colleagues have found moral disengagement to positively predict intention to use doping substances (Lucidi et al., 2004) and self-reported use of doping substances (Lucidi et
al., 2008) in Italian high school students. In addition, in the process of developing a sport-specific measure of moral disengagement, Boardley and Kavussanu (2007) showed moral disengagement in sport to positively associate with self-reported antisocial conduct and negatively associate with self-reported prosocial acts.

In a qualitative study focusing on moral reasoning of young elite athletes, Long, Pantaléon, Bruant, and d’Arripe-Longueville (2006) asked athletes their reasons for transgressions in sport and found the reasons to reflect moral disengagement mechanisms. Displacement and diffusion of responsibilities were particularly salient in this sample. Overall, the sport-related findings to date suggest that further exploration of the use of moral disengagement mechanisms in competitive sport is warranted. At this early stage of work on moral disengagement mechanisms, it would seem especially important to directly target athletes’ own interpretations of their transgressive behavior. This could shed light on findings reported in the extant literature and offer descriptive information that is helpful in formulating questions and hypotheses for future research.

Given the need to enhance the descriptive foundation of this topic, the purpose of our study was to assess athletes’ use of moral disengagement in competitive sport. We pursued this aim by asking elite fighting sport (i.e., Taekwondo) and Basketball athletes to describe their transgressive behaviors and the reasons for adopting these behaviors. These sports were selected because they span degrees of physical contact and are both propitious to transgressions and moral disengagement (Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields, & Cooper, 1986; Conroy, Silva, Newcomer, Walker, & Johnson, 2001). Moreover, our methodological approach was selected because it was deemed especially useful for obtaining understanding of the use of moral disengagement in sport.

Method

Participants

The participants (N = 24) were 12 elite basketball players (BB) and 12 elite athletes in taekwondo (TKD), with equal gender representation by sport. Participants ranged from 20 to 27 years (M = 23.8, SD = 2.3) of age. The participants were French athletes recruited from elite or professional sport structures. Most trained 25–35 hr per week and had regularly participated in national and international competitions for at least 10 years.

Procedure

Interview Guide. Twenty-four semistructured interviews were conducted in French. The interview guide was developed based on psychosocial literature pertaining to moral disengagement mechanisms in daily life (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996) and moral functioning among elite athletes (e.g., Long et al., 2006). To help the participants reconstruct their experiences accurately, Rubin and Rubin’s (1995) guidelines for in-depth interviews were followed. Three types of questions were used: main questions, probe questions, and follow-up questions. Reformulation techniques and contrast questions were also used (Spradley, 1979).
The guide was divided into three parts. The first part included general information about the purpose of the study and questions about the athlete’s background and sport history (age, years of participation, competitive accomplishments). The study was presented as a qualitative investigation of elite athletes’ reasons for breaking sport rules. Each athlete was asked to recall typical transgressive behaviors adopted in competitive situations throughout her or his career to ensure effective reconstruction of their experience and identification of transgressions. The main questions were designed to elicit a contextual and temporal description of the situation in which transgressive behavior occurred. Typical questions were: “Could you describe a competition that was significant for you in terms of rules transgression? When was it? Where exactly?” The responses to the probe questions then gave the interviewer a deeper understanding of the transgressive behaviors and their context of emergence.

The second part of the interview guide focused on the most significant transgressive situations for the athlete. Two types of questions were used in this second part: probe questions and follow-up questions. Probe questions about the athlete’s social environment (e.g., training climate; coach, parent, teammate behaviors and expectations) and personal factors (e.g., personality, psychological state) were systematically used for each described situation. Finally, to infer potential moral disengagement mechanisms, follow-up questions were asked about the reasons for adopting the described transgressive behaviors (e.g., “What was the main reason you did that?”).

The closing section summarized the interview main topics and invited the participant to discuss any issues that may have been overlooked by the researcher. Upon completion of the interview, the participant was thanked and an appointment was made for the participant to comment on the researchers’ transcripts of the data.

**Interviewer and Interview Procedure.** The same female interviewer performed all the interviews. She was a 32-year-old physical education teacher doing doctoral work in sport psychology. In addition she used to be a taekwondo elite athlete (10 years ago) and she also had a good knowledge of basketball as an athlete and as a coach. Athletes were not informed that the interviewer was experienced in both sports. This extensive experience helped the interviewer to ask athletes accurate questions, though could introduce researcher bias. Data analysis was pursued in collaboration with the other research team members, who possessed considerably less personal experience in the particular sports, in an effort to mitigate potential biases in interpreting participant responses. Furthermore, the interviewer extensively trained for the interviews by reading qualitative interviewing technique books (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002) and conducting pilot interviews under the supervision of an experienced qualitative researcher.

For the main study, following authorization from national federations, coaches, and athletes, an initial visit was arranged to share the nature and goal of the present investigation and to distribute consent forms. Signed informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews. A pilot study with four elite athletes, one male and one female representative from each sport, helped to establish an appropriate interview guide. Individual interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, took place in a private room without any distraction, and were recorded. Through-
out the interview, a dictaphone and note-taking material were used to facilitate follow-up questions. Confidentiality of participants was ensured and the following coding system was adopted: BB.F1 to BB.F6 for the female basketball players, BB.M1 to BB.M6 for the male basketball players, TKD.F1 to TKD.F6 for the female taekwondo athletes, and TKD.M1 to TKD.M6 for the male taekwondo athletes.

**Trustworthiness.** Two methods were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. First, the pilot interviews helped to develop a theoretically-based and sport-adapted interview guide. Second, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants so that they could examine and comment on the content of the transcripts. A few athletes added information to specify their reported experience.

**Data Analysis**

To ensure that the determined codes and categories were embodied in rather than forced on the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we adopted both inductive and deductive content analyses to analyze the interview transcripts. Such a combination has been recommended by qualitative methodologists (e.g., Patton, 2002) and has been used by other sport psychology researchers (e.g., Garcia Bengoechea & Strean, 2007; Vazou, Ntoumanis, & Duda, 2005) to conduct content analysis in studies with a strong theoretical orientation. Because our interview guide was designed to obtain spontaneous information about the reasons for transgressive behaviors in competitive sport contexts, without directly mentioning the moral disengagement mechanisms, our analysis started inductively. This helped us to ensure that the categories were embodied in rather than forced on the data and that new emerging categories could be identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The deductive content analysis then consisted of naming codes or categories after concepts already in the literature. Specifically, reference to the eight moral disengagement mechanisms in daily life (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996) was made when they were deemed relevant to embrace and label the emerging codes and subcategories.

Three of the four authors, all familiar with the sport psychology literature and qualitative methods, read the transcriptions a number of times. Then a random sample of ten transcripts, five in each sport, was selected. Two of these authors independently identified two series of meaning units (MUs) in this sample of transcripts. The first series of corresponded to distinct transgressive behaviors in specific situations, and the second series corresponded to the reasons for adopting a given transgressive behavior. These reasons allowed the identification of moral disengagement mechanisms. Therefore each described transgressive situation was characterized by one MU for the identified behavior, and one MU for each of the related moral disengagement mechanisms. To avoid any bias due the interviewer’s questioning strategy (Sparkes, 1998), a new MU related to the same situation was only considered if it offered new information. Within these themes of behaviors and reasons, respectively, the identified MUs were then compared and grouped by the three authors into increasingly more complex categories according to common features, using new labels or preexisting concepts. Subsequent MUs were compared with MUs already coded and integrated into emerging categories, until a particular category was saturated; that is, no new information about this category
emerged (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The three authors discussed the categorization until a consensus was reached. This step required a constant and extensive review of the moral disengagement literature. Then the first author coded the remaining 14 transcripts and the entire analysis was independently checked by two other researchers familiar with the moral development literature and experienced in qualitative methods. Initial agreement with coding decisions was high (i.e., 87% of codes). The resulting discrepancies or feedback led to a few changes in the organization and the labeling of the data (e.g., new labels changed to preexisting concepts). Once qualitative saturation was reached with the data gathered through the individual interviews, four focus group interviews involving five athletes in each sport were conducted. The assumption was that additional information might emerge in the context of group dynamics and interactions (e.g., Morgan, 1997), but this was not the case. Therefore, the focus group responses are not presented here. As a final analysis step, we tabulated the percent of reason MUs ascribed to each moral disengagement mechanism, as well as the proportion of participants making reference to a given moral disengagement mechanism.

**Results**

All transcribed interviews were analyzed line by line and content analysis led to the identification of 758 MUs related to the study purpose: 256 MUs for the characteristics of transgressive behaviors, and 502 MUs for the moral disengagement mechanisms. The results are organized into two parts. The first describes the characteristics of transgressive behaviors in elite athletes, and the second part presents their related moral disengagement mechanisms.

**Transgressive Behaviors**

Three categories of transgressive behaviors were identified: (a) using the sport rules to one’s advantage, (b) unintentional fouls, and (c) aggressions. Using the sport rules included concealed fouls and instigated fouls. Concealed fouls involved the athlete’s attempts to use the rules to her or his personal or team advantage (e.g., to gain time, protect oneself, gain an advantage over the opponent) by disguising or turning the rules around, as shown in the following quote:

> Because we know the rules so well, we know how things happen, we know what needs to be done, we know what we can’t do; and because of this, we know how to gain time by letting the referee think our body protection (for shins, arms and genitalia) needs to be adjusted for example (TKD.F3).

Instigated fouls to gain an advantage first involved simulating being the victim of a rule violation, as highlighted below:

> We can simulate the offensive charge by falling backward and by shouting a bit . . . this is a little vice (BB.F2).

Instigated fouls to gain an advantage also involved provoking a foul by the opponent. For example, an athlete said:
Trying to push him out of the fighting area, to get him to commit a foul against me, or make him grab me . . . that is to say, to put him under pressure so he makes a mistake (TKD.M1).

Unintentional fouls consisted of both uncontrolled and automatic behaviors. Uncontrolled behaviors concerned awkward actions. Automatic behaviors were characterized by unintentional reflexive behaviors that have been internalized over many years of training, as highlighted by the following quote:

This is something we don’t do at all in the beginning, but after a while it becomes automatic to put the knee forward while shooting, for example (BB.F3).

Aggressions were either verbal and directed toward the opponent or referee or were physical (e.g., pulling, pushing) and directed toward the opponent during the game or fight. The following two quotes illustrate these different types of aggression:

I sometimes argue or make an unpleasant remark in a loud voice toward the opponent or the official, so everybody will know I’m dissatisfied (BB.M5).

. . . sometimes I would allow myself to pull or push my opponents and use borderline techniques (TKD.M3).

**Moral Disengagement Mechanisms**

The identified moral disengagement mechanisms and their associated transgressive behaviors in elite sport are presented in Table 1. The MUs from the qualitative analysis were deemed to reflect the eight moral disengagement mechanisms specified by Bandura et al. (1996). No additional mechanisms emerged from the data. These eight mechanisms are described and illustrated below.

**Moral Justification.** This mechanism was mentioned by 45.8% of the sample and represented 4.2% of the MUs. Athletes used this mechanism to justify their transgressions, and was characterized by the strong need to convert the transgression into a socially or morally acceptable and laudable act in terms of the sport’s competitive ethos. The following quote illustrates this idea:

When one competes, one competes to win. Thus it is normal to cheat from time to time to gain or regain the advantage (TKD.M2).

Moral justification also involved making reference to a code of honor, as outlined below:

So when team honor is at stake, it’s alright to transgress rules or fight to protect our partners (BB.M2).

The transgressive behaviors typically associated with this mechanism were using the sport rules to one’s advantage. The following quotes illustrate the two characteristics of this mechanism:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral Disengagement Mechanisms</th>
<th>Number of MUs</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Characteristics of Moral Disengagement Mechanisms</th>
<th>Associated Transgressive Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Displacement of responsibility</td>
<td>152 (30.3%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>- To justify one’s transgressions by citing social pressure from the coach, the referee, the opponent(s) and/or partner(s), or the spectators</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls&lt;br&gt;- Verbal/physical aggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of blame</td>
<td>91 MUs (18.1%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>- To justify transgressions as defensive reactions to an opponent’s and/or partner’s behavior</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls&lt;br&gt;- Instigated fouls&lt;br&gt;- Verbal/physical aggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimizing or ignoring the consequences</td>
<td>88 MUs (17.5%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>- To reduce or ignore the seriousness of the transgressions to avoid facing the harm that was caused</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls&lt;br&gt;- Instigated fouls&lt;br&gt;- Uncontrolled behaviors&lt;br&gt;- Automatic behaviors&lt;br&gt;- Physical aggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euphemistic labeling</td>
<td>77 MUs (15.3%)</td>
<td>23 (95.8%)</td>
<td>- To camouflage or attenuate transgressive behaviors by putting them into the context of common rule breaking in sport</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls&lt;br&gt;- Instigated fouls&lt;br&gt;- Uncontrolled behaviors&lt;br&gt;- Automatic behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusion of responsibility</td>
<td>62 MUs (12.4%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>- To ascribe transgressions to one’s own team, the opposing team, or the entire community of athletes</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls&lt;br&gt;- Instigated fouls&lt;br&gt;- Physical aggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral justification</td>
<td>21 MUs (4.2%)</td>
<td>11 (45.8%)</td>
<td>- To make the transgression acceptable relative to the sport competitive ethos or a code of honor</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls&lt;br&gt;- Instigated fouls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(continued)
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advantageous comparison</td>
<td>7 MUs (1.4%)</td>
<td>5 (20.8%)</td>
<td>- To reduce the seriousness of a transgression by comparison with other violations in other sports or daily life contexts</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dehumanization</td>
<td>4 MUs (0.8%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
<td>- To remove human qualities from the opponent or referee</td>
<td>- Concealed fouls - Verbal aggressions</td>
</tr>
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*Note. N = 24; MU = Meaning Unit.*
**Advantageous Comparison.** This mechanism was used by the athletes (1.4% of MUs) to justify their transgressions, and was characterized by the strong need to reduce the seriousness of a transgression by comparing it with other sports’ rules violations, as shown in the following quote:

> Because in basketball, even if there is some contact, it’s nothing like rugby; rugby is much tougher, less technical but more physical, with much more physical aggression (BB.F5).

Advantageous comparison also referred to comparisons with law-breaking acts in everyday life, as illustrated below:

> It is true that one cheats quite a lot in Taekwondo, but it is nothing compared to stealing or killing somebody! (TKD.M3)

This mechanism was indicated in the responses of 20.8% of the sample. The transgressive behavior typically associated with this mechanism was using the sport rules to one’s advantage, in particular concealed fouls.

**Euphemistic Labeling.** This mechanism was indicated by the responses of 95.8% of the total sample and represented 15.3% of the MUs. Athletes used euphemistic labeling as a means of camouflaging or attenuating transgressive behaviors by putting them into the context of common rule breaking in sport. The transgressive behaviors typically associated with this mechanism were using the sport rules to one’s advantage and unintentional fouls. In fact, athletes advocated that their transgressive behaviors were not serious, as illustrated by the following two quotes:

> In this situation, I pulled the shirt, pulled the shorts and used an elbow; but these are just crafty little tricks, little acts of deceit (BB.F3).

> During competitions, when you hit hard or jostle your opponents, it’s just a means to clear a way for yourself (BB.M1).

**Minimizing or Ignoring the Consequences.** A sizable proportion of MUs (17.5%) pertained to minimizing or ignoring the seriousness of transgressions. This mechanism was reflected in the responses of all interviewees (100% of the total sample). For instance, athletes sometimes ignored the seriousness of the consequences of their transgressions or indicated that their transgressions were not serious if they did not result in physical injury or affect the match outcome. The associated transgressive behaviors were using the sport rules to one’s advantage, unintentional fouls and physical aggressions. The following quotes illustrate ignoring and minimizing of consequences, respectively:

> In this match, which was physical, it ended at the hospital. In fact XX injured his ankle when I got back the ball in an aggressive way . . . I pushed him violently on his back but the referee did not catch me. But if you get obsessed about it, you can’t play anymore . . . it’s no concern of mine (BB.M2).
There, when I made a foul, I was very aggressive, but it did not have great consequence on the result as X still won the contest (TKD.F1).

**Attribution of Blame.** This mechanism was one of the two most frequently used mechanisms by the athletes (18.1% of MUs) to justify their transgressions, and is characterized by an athlete justifying her or his own behavior as stemming from provocation by an opponent; it is not their fault. Responses reflecting this mechanism were given by 100% of the participants. Aggressions were primarily associated with attribution of blame and, to a lesser degree, using the sport rules to one’s advantage. For the athletes, attribution of blame to the opponent appeared to originate from the perception of unSPORTSMANLIKE play from the opponent, as the following excerpts illustrate:

Finally, I was facing a girl . . . I could see that she was a fighter . . . and I wasn’t going to let her push me around, because she started breaking the rules, grabbing on . . . So, I fought just like her (TKD.F5).

We had already played against this team and I remembered very well how the captain . . . treated some of us like shit. So I decided to show him we could do the same, and I tried to intimidate him by playing borderline with the rules (BB.M2).

**Dehumanization.** Dehumanization was the least used moral disengagement mechanism (0.8% of MUs) and involved removing human qualities from an opponent or referee. This mechanism was mentioned by a small proportion of the participants (i.e., 12.5%). The associated transgressive behaviors were concealed fouls and verbal aggressions. The two following quotes illustrate this mechanism:

That girl was somebody awful, a real monster that we ran into all the time… and that we also used to insult time to time . . . (BB.F1).

This girl behaves like an animal. She never lets sentiment interfere with business. So you cannot help being violent with her! (BB.F5)

**Displacement of Responsibility.** This mechanism was the most often used mechanism by the athletes (30.3% of MUs) and was reflected in the responses of all of the interviewees (100% of the total sample). This mechanism consisted of justifying one’s transgressions as resulting from social pressure. In fact, athletes advocated that their transgressive behaviors were not their fault. This social pressure came primarily from the coach, but also from the referee, the other athletes (i.e., an opponent or a partner), and the spectators. This mechanism was primarily associated with transgressive behaviors based on using the sport rules to one’s advantage and aggressions. Displacement of responsibility toward the coach, athletes and spectators mainly occurred in competitive situations with high stakes, coupled with pressure about the score. The following extract illustrates displacement of responsibility toward the coach:
That comes from the coach, who says to us: “OK, now you go ‘bing’, you nudge her, and you press through to the opponent’s basket” (BB.F6).

Displacement of responsibility toward the referee was mainly associated with perception of injustice following the refereeing. As one athlete said:

During the first part of the game, the referee whistled many wrongful fouls. Therefore in the second part of the game, I took any occasion to cheat when it was possible (BB.M5).

**Diffusion of Responsibility.** This mechanism was frequently used by the athletes (12.4% of MUs) and involved ascribing transgressions to many: one’s own team, the opposing team or the entire community of athletes. This mechanism was reflected in the responses of 100% of the sample. It reflected the belief that one’s own transgressions were acceptable because “everybody does it”, and it is the fault of nobody. This mechanism was typically associated with using the sport rules to one’s advantage and physical aggressions. In the athletes’ words:

You see in this game, everybody was on the same wavelength. We played as one and agreed to use all the weapons we had to reach our goal. And we got it, not always fairly that’s true, but we got it, as one . . . [everyone] broke the rules, so one cannot be blamed for doing the same thing as everyone else . . . ! (BB.M1)

During the contest, pretending to have a problem with your equipment is a typical strategy: everyone of a good level on my team knows this trick and uses it (TKD.F1).

**Discussion**

In the current study we assessed athletes’ use of moral disengagement in competitive sport by asking elite fighting sport and contact sport athletes to describe their transgressive behaviors and the reasons for adopting these behaviors. Specifically, we examined how the moral disengagement mechanisms (i.e., moral justification, advantageous comparison, euphemistic labeling, minimizing or ignoring the consequences, attribution of blame, dehumanization, displacement of responsibility, and diffusion of responsibility) identified by Bandura et al. (1996) in everyday life are germane in the sport context.

We found that the transgressive behaviors associated with moral disengagement mechanisms were using the sport rules to one’s advantage, unintentional fouls, and verbal or physical aggressions. These types of behaviors are consistent with those previously identified by elite athletes (d’Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, & Dubois, 1998; Long et al., 2006) and individuals in other contexts facing situations with high stakes for their personal advancement (Friedberg, 1993; Furnham, 2005). Although some of the emerging fouls were uncontrolled and linked to automatic behaviors, others were instigated or concealed and part of the athletes’ strategy to win (Long et al., 2006). All the described transgressions were per-
ceived by the athletes as common features of their competitive contexts and as part of their daily sport behaviors.

The reasons athletes gave for transgressing helped us identify the underlying moral disengagement mechanisms operating in the sport context. Our study indicates that the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement in everyday life that Bandura et al. (1996) specified are operational in elite sport, though to varying degrees and in some ways with different emphasis. For example, moral justification was characterized by converting transgressions into acceptable acts with reference to the sport competitive ethos or a code of honor maintained by the team or within the specific sport. The latter characteristic aligns with the mechanism as defined by Bandura et al., whereas the former offers a potential connection with game reasoning theory (Shields & Bredemeier, 2001, 2007). According to game reasoning theory, the sport context differs from everyday life contexts in terms of constraints of space, rules, time, and values. These differences are assumed to modify usual moral reasoning structures toward being more self-centered because of the stakes of sport. Furthermore, the mechanisms of advantageous comparison, euphemistic labeling and minimizing or ignoring the consequences that were identified by the athletes were aimed at lessening the seriousness of transgressions by referring to the culture of sport (common rule breaking in competition and assertion of the physical integrity of the adversary) or by contrasting transgressions with more serious situations of daily life. In this way, game reasoning may be shaping the moral disengagement process. A potentially fruitful direction for future research would be to examine the interface of these two processes.

In addition, we found that certain moral disengagement mechanisms predominated in the sport context (i.e., displacement and diffusion of responsibility, attribution of blame, minimizing or ignoring the consequences, and euphemistic labeling). Our findings suggest that these mechanisms could be grouped into two main categories of moral disengagement. The first involves projecting fault onto others for one’s transgressions and can be summarized by the expression “It’s not my fault”. This category includes the mechanisms of displacement of responsibility, attribution of blame, and diffusion of responsibility. The second category involves the minimization of transgressions and their consequences and can be summarized by the expression “It’s not serious”. This category includes the mechanisms of minimizing or ignoring the consequences and euphemistic labeling. These general categories of moral disengagement mechanisms warrant attention in future sport-based studies of moral transgression.

Given the different methodological approaches employed, the findings of the current study must be cautiously compared with those of Bandura and colleagues. This acknowledged, we note that the moral disengagement mechanisms predominant in our results (i.e., displacement and diffusion of responsibility, attribution of blame, minimizing or ignoring the consequences, and euphemistic labeling) differ from those shown to be most salient in daily life, where cognitive restructuring of harmful conduct through moral justification, advantageous comparison, along with euphemistic labeling, are the key psychological mechanisms for disengaging moral control (Bandura, 1999). There may be value in future work that targets the relative salience of moral disengagement mechanisms in various contexts.

This research enabled us to establish that the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement described in everyday life by Bandura et al. (1996) were opera-
Moral Disengagement in Sport

401

tional in elite sport, while highlighting dominance of certain mechanisms within sport. An additional strength of the current study is that the participants were elite athletes of both genders who took part in international competitions (i.e., European or World Championships; Olympic selections). As such, these athletes had exceptional experience in extremely stressful and demanding situations requiring extensive knowledge of sport rules and of personal strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, we can expect these athletes finely recall their transgressions because of their extensive sport experience. Finally, the qualitative methodology integrated various procedures (e.g., qualitative saturation, analyst triangulation, external audits) to strengthen the credibility of the data and results (Huberman & Miles, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This work, therefore, offers a useful foundation for pursuing further research on the expression of moral disengagement mechanisms in sport.

The strengths of this work, as with any study, should be considered in light of study limitations. Participants had to reconstruct past experiences, which may have generated distortions of what actually occurred despite our methodological precautions (Ericsson & Simon, 1980). Moreover, participants were interviewed about a potentially sensitive topic and may have given socially desirable answers. To address this in future research, observational data could be added to assess the consistency of different data sources (Huberman & Miles, 1991). Furthermore, the generalizability of our findings may be questioned given the limited sample size, narrow sport representation, and elite makeup of the participants. Future research should examine a broader range of athletic activities and participants to gain understanding of moral disengagement perceptions as a function of potential moderators such as age, competitive level and culture.

Pursuit of such work would benefit from examination of moral disengagement within various theoretical frameworks. For example, because individual characteristics, such as the desire to win, appeared as underlying factors of moral disengagement mechanisms in the current study, in line with recent efforts (e.g., Boardley & Kavussanu, 2008) it would be valuable to further investigate the connection of motivational variables and moral disengagement. Specifically, it would be of interest to study moral disengagement in sport from the point of view of the 2 × 2 achievement goal framework (e.g., Cury, Elliot, Da Fonseca, & Moller, 2006; Elliot & McGregor, 2001) in which approach and avoidance achievement goals is crossed with the performance and mastery goal forms. The approach-avoidance dimension is construed as cognitive representations of positive possibilities or avoiding negative possibilities, respectively, and has not been studied in relation to moral variables in sport.

Furthermore, because displacement and diffusion of responsibility mechanisms are important in competitive sport, it would be interesting to examine their relationships with causal attributions. Indeed such attributions have been shown as important antecedents of interpersonal emotions and transgressive behaviors (Weiner, 1995). Finally, the consequences of moral disengagement mechanisms could be examined in relation to sport cheating behaviors and cognitive and emotional reactions within experimental designs (Aquino et al., 2007). Together, the current study and these research avenues should help us strengthen the moral development literature related to sport and physical activity contexts.
Such theoretically grounded work should enhance our ability to forward efficacious practical strategies for reducing moral transgressions in sport. At present our work enables us to generally state that helping athletes develop self-regulation skills, such as learning how to avoid or ignore social pressure and to acknowledge their personal responsibility when they transgress sport rules, will be beneficial. This will mitigate the likelihood of moral disengagement characterized by the declaration “It’s not my fault”. In addition, encouraging athletes to consider the nature of their actions in sport, perhaps through debriefing after contests, and helping them recognize the connection of rule breaking with moral principles can temper the use of “It’s not serious” as a justification for moral transgression. Of course, such strategies are much more easily forwarded in these pages than they are executed within the highly demanding sport context. We are eager to see development of the moral disengagement research area, as undoubtedly it will enable the narrowing of this gap.

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References


